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ABSTRACT

Based upon research conducted during the past decade that identifies speech features of form, topic, content, and use of language as male- or female-associated, this paper examines the rhetoric of Sojourner Truth in reference to these features. It classifies her directness, originality, and action as male-associated and her modesty, emotionalism, and sensitivity as female-associated. It concludes that hers was an androgyrous speech that was not limited by genderlect. (Author)

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SOJOURNER TRUTH - A WOMAN OF STRENGTH AND VISION

Abstract

Features of Form, Topic, Content, and Use of language are identified as male- or female-associated based on research studies conducted during the past decade. The rhetoric of Sojourner Truth is examined in reference to these features. Her directness, originality, and action may be classified as male-associated; modest, emotionality, and sensitivity have been marked female-associated. The end product is androgynous speech which is not limited by genderlect.

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The title of this paper is non-equivocal and direct. So was the woman who is the subject of my talk today.

My presentation this morning will briefly examine the life and rhetoric of Sojourner Truth, as we know about it, within the framework of women's speech.

Within the past decade, much has been written identifying and clarifying features of women's language. Robin Lakoff[1] early in the 1970's, described features of women's language as she observed them and related these to women's traditional place. More recently, Lakoff[2] has been writing a "grammar" of women's language, and concludes that basically women's language is a language of deference. For example, features of rising intonation (male: what time is dinner? female: oh, about six o'clock?), qualifiers (it's kinda chilly in here), tag-questions (that's pretty, isn't it?) are not isolated linguistic forms, but logically co-occur in a particular individual's speech and define it as being deferent or "feminine."

An outline for examining women's speech that I have found particularly helpful was suggested to me by Lois Bloom.[3] It considers the components of speech in terms of Form, Topic, Content, and Use. The transparency which you see lists a few characteristics of speech in each of these categories and identifies them as either male- or female-associated.

SOME SEX-ASSOCIATED FEATURES OF SPEECH[4]

	male	female
FORM	direct	euphemistic
	straight-forward	qualified-polite
	little vocal variation	marked pitch variation
	original	predictable
TOPIC	politics, issues	home
	sports	family
CONTENT	intellectual	emotional
	descriptive	evaluative
USE	assertion	questioning
	direct imperative	compliance

As we talk about Sojourner Truth, it will be seen that her speech is best classified as androgynous-- combining features characteristic of both sexes. Mary Ritchie Key[5] writing in 1975, stressed that androgynous speech should be the goal for all who wish to communicate effectively. Sojourner Truth, speaking in the 1800's, already accomplished this. Victoria Ortiz[6], one of Sojourner's biographers, noted that this "'masculine' woman was praised also for those qualities considered 'feminine': gentleness, compassion, kindness...to her that blend of strength and gentleness was precisely the essence of true womanhood." Let us look at this more closely.

In 1797, a baby girl was born of a slave woman, Elizabeth, who was the property of Col. Hardenburgh of Hurley, New York. The baby was named Isabella and lived her first thirty years of life as the property of various slave holders. She was granted her freedom in 1827, and at about this time also changed her name and began her new life as a free woman, Sojourner Truth.

Although she could neither read nor write, Sojourner Truth spent most of her adult years as a respected public speaker who traveled around the country speaking primarily to white audiences on issues of the day. She was billed as a "lecturer" who would draw upon her experiences as a slave mother and religious woman. She was reputedly hightly recommended as a public speaker by such luminaries as Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison. Harriet Beecher Stowe had written an essaby about Sojourner called The Libyan Sybil.

Sojourner Truth spoke out on major issues of the day. For example, she was invited to address the Michigan State Legislature on the issue of Capital Punishment.[7] She pointed out that "the person who wants to see his fellow beings hung by the neck until dead has a murderous spot in his heart." (Her choice of words was direct and non-euphemistic.)

She spoke out against segregated transportation, and matched her words with action.[8] It is reported that when she lodged a complaint with the president of the streetcar company in Washington, D.C., trolley cars in that city became officially integrated. Nevertheless, she continued to have some difficulties. For example, on one occasion, Sojourner Truth signaled a "white" streetcar to stop for her and it passed her by. A second streetcar came along and did the same thing. Finally, she began shouting loudly: "I want to ride! I want to ride!" People gathered around her, causing the trolley to be blocked. Sojourner took advantage of this to board the car and take a seat. The conductor repeatedly threatened to throw her off, but Sojourner sat firmly riding beyond her stop. She held her dignity and stated that she was a passenger like any other and the law was on her side. When she finally got off she remarked, "Bless God! I have had a ride!"

Althought full texts of Sojourner Truth's speeches are not available, various biographers have recorded segments. Sojourner Truth traveled to and spoke in twenty-two states to deliver her anti-slavery message. Though certainly not formally trained as a lecturer, she used many techniques that were especially effective in winning over her audiences. For example, while combining pride and modesty, she endeared herself to white audiences by often addressing them collectively as "children" and individually as "honey." It is questionable whether this would work with a contemporary audience, but in the 1850's this was viewed as a sign of genuine affection and reportedly endeared her to many.

Sojourner Truth was original in coining expressions-- an attribute reportedly more common to males. Her tongue-in-cheek modesty was revealed by her opening, "Children, I've come here like the rest of you to hear what I have to say." This remark was later used by other speakers.

In cajoling individuals to take action independently, she would say "every tub has to sit on its own bottom."[9]

As a speaker, Sojourner Truth knew the importance of making remarks personal, so that the audience could feel and sense, not only intellectually know. (This might be viewed as a female-associated approach.) In speaking against slavery she honestly said, "And now, when I hear them tell of whipping women on the bare flesh, it makes my flesh crawl, and my very hair rise on my head."

Sojourner knew that to win an audience you had to first identify with that audience, and not come out as a direct antagonist. On one occasion, when she was sharing the podium with George Thompson, a white British Parliamentarian of some reknown, Sojourner addressed the white Syracuse, New York audience first. They had come to listen to Thompson and were not initially receptive to Sojourner, but she won them through empathy by saying, "I'll tell you what Thompson is going to say to you. He's going to argue that the poor Negroes ought to be out of slavery and in the heavenly state of freedom. But, children, I'm against slavery because I want to keep the white folks who hold slaves from getting sent to hell." Here Sojourner did not mince words or use euphemisms, but used strong forceful "unladylike" language.

Sojourner Truth was a woman who identified as one, and yet was androgynous in many ways. At her death, a eulogy in a New York paper remarked that she "did not seek applause of her fellow beings" but worked

quietly and with modesty. Frederick Douglass noted that she had been venerable for age, distinguished for insight into human nature, remarkable for independence and courageous self-assertion." Clearly a blend of the best in male and female characteristics.

Sojourner Truth was a spokesperson for women's rights. In 1850, she attended a Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts. This was one of her first contacts with the feminist movement. After a time she was invited to address the gathering. She is reported to have said, "Sisters, I'm not clear what you are after. If women want any rights more'n what they've got, why don't they just take them, and not be talking about it." Someone then asked her why she didn't wear bloomers like the other suffragettes. She responded, "I had bloomers enought when I was in bondage. You see, they used to weave what they called nigger-cloth, and each one of us got just such a strip, and had to wear it width-wise... I had enough of bloomers in them days."[10]

Here we see Sojourner's direct and aggressive approach, also the practicality of her thinking. Women should <u>do</u> what was necessary and not just talk about it.

Although she was not one to wear bloomers she was critical of women's fashions[11] and argued against the "mothers and gray-haired grand-mothers who wore panniers and Grecian-bend backs and flummeries.. high-heeled shoes and humps on their heads." She questioned, "What kind of reformers are you with goose-wings on your heads, as if you were going to fly, and dressed in such ridiculous fashion, talking about reform and women's rights. It appears to me, you had better reform yourselves first." Sojourner believed that one communicated also non-verbally, and the image of "frivolous" clothing contradicted

the serious verbal message of equal rights for women. Although her words transcribed, appear to be hedged, or qualified ("it appears to me") probably the forcefullness of her delivery left no doubt about her message. Unfortunately her speeches were before the days of tape recordings, and all we have are reports which described her voice as full, deep, robust and calm.

Her stated views about the relative capacity of the sexes, are unacceptable to many of us today, but her skill in speaking for equal rights was convincing. "Suppose a man's mind hold a quart, and a woman's don't hold but a pint; if her pint is full, it's as good as his quart." These particular remarks might also be interpreted as "going along" with the male audience's beliefs about sex differences, in order to get them to accept her position.. a rhetorical ploy! This second interpretation is most likely in view of her own sense of competence and worth!

Years later, at a Woman's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth was eloquent.[12]

"Well children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that twixt the niggers of the South and the women at the North all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?...That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place, and aren't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me--and aren't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as aman (when I could get it), and bear the lash as well--and aren't I a woman? I have borne five children and seen them most all sold into slavery, and when I cried out with a woman's grief, none but Jesus heard--

and aren't I a woman?... If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, all alone, these together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again, and they are asking to do it, the men better let them."

In this speech, once again, Sojourner Truth used a personal, emotional appeal. In addition, she forcefully used the imperative (typically male-associated), "Look at me!, Look at my arm!" Her reiteration of the rhetorical question "and aren't I a woman" (in some biographies transcribed as "and ain't I a woman?") is a style frequently used by black clergy. Its force is found in the downward intonation of the delivery, so that the audience must respond affirmatively. This contrasts with the upward inflected questioning pattern associated with women's speech.

Just before Sojourner Truth died on November 26, 1883, she said, to a friend, "I'm not going to die, Honey; I'm going home like a shooting star."[13] Her strength and vision have shone as a star and inspiration to those who heard her speak, and to succeeding generations who have studied her rhetoric and read about her life. Much of her impact is the result of her unwillingness to lock herself in either sex role. She was not only unshackled from slavery, but through her creativity lived and spoke using the best of male and female styles and emerging as a full person who contributed much for humanity.

NOTES

1-Lakoff, Robin. Language and woman's place. Language in Society, 1973, 2, 45-80.

2- Lakoff, Robin. Women's styles of speaking: Their psychological significance. Keynote address at Conference on Women's Language, Language and Style, Graduate Center, City University of New York, April 16, 1977.

3-For more detail see Bloom, L. and Lahey, M. Language development and language disorders. New YOrk: John Wiley & Sons, 1978.

4-Haas, A.N. Production of sex-associated features of spoken language by four-, eight-, and twelve-year old boys and girls. Doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1978.

5-Key, Mary Ritchie. Male/female language. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975.

6-Ortiz, Victoria. Sojourner Truth, a self-made woman. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1974, p. 82.

7-ibid. p. 136.

8-ibid. pp. 136-7.

9-ibid. p. 60.

10-Truth, Sojourner. Narrative and Book of Life. Chicago: Ebony Classics, Johnson Publishing Company, 1970, pp. 127-8.

11-Ortiz, pp. 82-3

12-ibid, p. 87.

13-ibid, p. 143.

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